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**Supervisors Agree to Improve Legal Services for Juveniles**

Hoping to improve the quality of legal representation children receive in the County's juvenile justice system, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors agreed to examine and recommend improvements.

Acting on a motion by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, the board opted to analyze and review the current system which often does not offer young offenders adequate defense.

Currently, many juveniles brought to delinquency court cannot afford to retain a lawyer and are represented by panel attorneys, or court appointed attorneys, with results that can be disastrous. These attorneys are paid a flat fee of \$317-\$350 regardless of the case's complexity, and they do not have access to the investigative tools – such as expert witnesses and other resources -- needed to adequately defend a client.

Witnesses at Tuesday's hearing conveyed how their lives had been derailed by ineffective attorneys who did not protect their constitutional rights or who decided to plead out a case and agree to their incarceration, instead of vigorously defending them.

Francisco Carrillo said he was sentenced to life for a murder he did not commit. After spending 20 years in prison, he was released by a judge who noted that his case was not handled properly by his attorney.

"My life wasn't taken seriously," said Carrillo, who said he was now studying to become a lawyer. "My attorney didn't have the proper tools to help me."

Because so many children in the juvenile justice system suffer from mental health issues or disabilities, there is a high need for trained attorneys who can obtain crucial records and advocate effectively for them. Speaking in support of the proposal were several advocates and attorneys.

“The motion will illuminate the critical differences in the kind of representation a panel attorney can offer,” said retired Judge Jan G. Levine at the public hearing. “Panel attorneys do not have meaningful access to investigators, social workers or legal specialists who can assist them in building a case.”

The board expects a report from the county’s auditor controller, including how to implement recommendations made by the Presiding Judge of Juvenile Court, Judge Michael Nash, within 60 days.

“This is about juvenile justice and the protection of rights of young people,” said Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas. “Undiagnosed mental health and disabilities are feeding the prison pipeline. We are concerned about children at risk and so this motion calls for the hiring of an independent consultant to conduct an analysis of the juvenile indigent defense system so we can make matters better.”

Added Carol Chodroff, Juvenile Policy Attorney and Former Public Defender: “This motion makes sense; it is a critically important step in protecting the constitutional rights of children in the juvenile justice system and has overwhelming community support.”

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